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A Proper Family Holiday

Written by Chris Manby

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CHRISSIE MANBY

A PROPER FAMILY HOLIDAY



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Prologue

Of the many family photographs that graced the shelves in Jacqui Benson's living room, there were three of which she was particularly fond. The first, taken in the mid nineteen-eighties, was a photograph of an apple-cheeked baby girl, her younger daughter Chelsea, smiling in toothless delight as her grandfather Bill held her for her first paddle in the shallows of the sea. Chelsea's big sister Ronnie, just two, stood alongside, gripping their father Dave's hand for balance. Ronnie's smile was big and proud as she waved a plastic spade at her mother behind the camera. That photograph was taken at Littlehampton, on a rare bright day in a fortnight of rain. They were staying in a borrowed caravan that smelled of Benson and Hedges and wet dog but didn't they have a great time?

The second photograph had been taken four years later. Same resort. Different caravan. Chelsea was five by now and Ronnie was six and a half. This time, neither sister needed an adult for support as they dashed in and out of the sea. Together with Granddad Bill, they had built a sandcastle and were filling the moat bucket by bucket. It was a thankless task; they spent the entire afternoon going backwards and forwards, spilling more than they managed to tip into the channel and finding it soaked away altogether before they got back with another load. In the photograph, the sun

was shining, though Jacqui remembered it as another wet fortnight. Stormy even. Wasn't that the holiday where the caravan's awning blew away in the middle of the night? All the same, they had a laugh.

The third photograph was taken in the late nineteen-nineties. Littlehampton again. Granddad Bill liked the old-fashioned seaside town so much he'd bought a static van on a proper full service campsite when he retired. It was a great idea – free holidays for all the family when money was especially tight. In this photograph, the girls were on the beach once more but they were too old for paddling and sandcastles now. They'd spent the morning – a brief respite of sunshine in a fortnight of near monsoon conditions – stretched out on their beach-towels, listening to music, playing it super-cool whenever a good-looking boy walked by and dissolving into giggles once he was past them. They sat up for the photograph, taken by their father. Ronnie had slung her arm round her sister Chelsea's shoulders. Chelsea's expression, eyes rolling even as she tried not to laugh, suggested their dad had just told one of his 'jokes'. This photograph was especially precious to Jacqui. It was the last photograph she had of her daughters together, great friends as well as sisters, enjoying each other's company on a family holiday.

Sixteen years later, Jacqui had decided that it was time to recreate that togetherness again. Only this time with more reliable weather.

Chapter One

Chelsea

Five thirty-seven. The alarm clock on Chelsea Benson's bedside table had been going off for five whole minutes. Chelsea remained in a deep slumber, flat on her back, legs and arms spread wide like a starfish, and snoring so hard that her breath actually stirred the panels of the Japanese paper lampshade hanging above her bed.

Six twenty-three. The alarm had been sounding for fifty-one minutes. Chelsea snored on. She was finally woken by the sound of hammering on the front door of her flat and staggered to answer it, still half asleep. Her next-door neighbour, Pete, stood on the doorstep, in his pyjamas.

'You're in. I told myself she can't be in. I told myself it would stop automatically. Or the batteries would run out. Or . . . or . . .'

With a good portion of her brain still stuck in the Land of Nod, Chelsea looked at Pete in confusion.

'Your alarm clock!' Pete spluttered. 'I can hear it through the walls.'

'Be-be-beep, be-be-beep, be-be-beep . . .' The little clock had not given up.

As if hearing the alarm for the very first time, Chelsea turned back towards her bedroom.

'No!' She was suddenly very wide-awake indeed. 'What time is it?'

'It's twenty-five past six on a Saturday morning!'

'Sorry, Pete. I'll make it up to you, I swear.'

She closed the door as quickly as she could without causing offence, then raced for her bedroom, turning off the alarm clock with a slam to its button while simultaneously working out her next move. Her brand-new wheelie case, still empty and bearing its shop tags, was on the floor by the wardrobe. The pile of holiday ironing she had meant to tackle the previous night was still resolutely wrinkled. No time to fix that. Her passport was . . . Where on earth was her passport?

Now Chelsea's mobile phone was vibrating on the dressing table.

I hope U R on yr way 2 Gatwick.

It was a message from her sister, Ronnie, who, together with her partner, Mark, and their two children, Jack and Sophie, was already well on her way from her home in Coventry to Birmingham Airport. There was no time to respond.

Chelsea chewed on her electric toothbrush as she threw clothes in the general direction of the suitcase. She hopped into the dress she'd been wearing the previous evening and dragged a wide-toothed comb through her wavy brown hair. The undeniably gorgeous dress at least made her look a little more put together, and looking more put-together always made her *feel* more put-together, which was useful. Despite the hurry, Chelsea paused for a moment and looked more carefully at the clothes she was planning to pack. Her favourite Chloé tunic? Check. Hepburn-style capris by Michael Kors? Check. Three new designer kaftans that

were very Talitha Getty circa 1965? Check. Chelsea wasn't sure it was the perfect holiday capsule wardrobe, but it was certainly getting there.

'Passport?' Chelsea muttered.

She spotted her passport on the table by the front door with her keys. Of course. She'd put it there so she wouldn't forget it. Six forty-five. She could still do this. She could still be on time and looking pretty stylish too, she thought, as she glanced in the mirror. The beautiful dress was made perfect for travelling with ballet flats and a fitted denim jacket. She stuck her bug-eyed Oliver Peoples sunglasses in her hair and gave herself a quick pout. Yes. Looking all right, considering.

It was only as she got to the tube station at Stockwell that Chelsea realised her passport was still in the very place she had put it to make certain it was not left behind.

'Aaaaaaagh!'

Seven fifteen. Chelsea was back at the tube station with her passport.

'There are slight delays on the Victoria line . . .'

Eight thirty-five. Chelsea stumbled off the train at Gatwick Airport. Her new wheelie case was more unwieldy than the average shopping trolley. It had gone totally rogue. Which terminal? North or south? She didn't have a clue.

We're checking in now, said her sister's latest text message. Are you even at your airport?

Chelsea found her airline. North Terminal. She made a run for it.

The girl on the check-in desk agreed it seemed cruel that she could not allow Chelsea to board her scheduled

flight even though the delayed nine o'clock to Lanzarote would be on the stand for at least another forty minutes as it waited for a take-off slot.

'But I can put you on a flight for tomorrow,' the girl suggested. 'I'm amazed there's space, to be honest. It is the school holidays.'

'Of course,' Chelsea sighed. Everybody was going away. The airport was absolutely heaving with new wheelie cases and their amateur drivers. Chelsea especially hated those stupid bloody Trunkis. Even as she stood at the check-in desk, a four-year-old boy was ramming a green one designed to look like a frog into the back of her ankles.

'Is tomorrow the best you can do?' Chelsea asked the check-in girl again.

'Unless you want to swim there,' the girl joked. 'Sorry. There are no more flights today.'

Had she any choice in the matter, at this point Chelsea would have given up on the whole idea of a week away, cut her losses and headed home. Unfortunately, she didn't have any choice in the matter at all. 'Stick me on tomorrow's flight,' she said.

The girl put out her hand expectantly. 'I'll need your credit card. Your old ticket isn't exchangeable.'

'You're kidding me?'

'Oh.' Having done some more tapping on her keyboard, the girl winced as though feeling the pain of what she was to say next. 'I'm afraid you'll have to buy a different flight home as well. Because the return portion of this ticket is dependent on your having flown out there today.'

'That can't be right.'

'It's in the conditions of your fare. The only available

return flight is next Sunday, so a day later. The total cost is three hundred and sixty-five pounds forty. Unless you also want to check in some luggage? That's another twenty-five pounds per item.'

'For heaven's sake,' Chelsea cried. She gave her credit card to the girl on the check-in desk, then turned and glared at the child with the ankle-bashing Trunki. He glared right back at her and gave her one more bash for luck.

It wasn't as though Chelsea wanted to go to Lanzarote anyway. Lanza-*grotty*, as the girls in her office all called it, had never featured high on Chelsea's list of places to see before she died. Chelsea was sure she knew everything there was to know about the tiny island. It was a volcanic dust bowl with nothing but slate-grey beaches. It was overrun with Brits. Every once passably beautiful bay or romantic cove now sported a burger bar and an Irish pub with an enormous flat-screen TV showing non-stop Sky Sports. The airlines that flew to Arrecife Airport said it all, as far as Chelsea was concerned. British Airways didn't go there. Serena, Chelsea's colleague at *Society*, the monthly fashion and gossip magazine where Chelsea was assistant features editor, said one should never fly to an airport that isn't served by British Airways. With the exception of Mustique.

Chelsea hadn't even told Serena she was going to Lanzarote. She just said 'Spain' and let Serena and the other uber-posh girls in the *Society* office imagine a carefully refurbished *finca* in an orange grove just outside Cadiz. Serena would have recoiled in horror at the very idea of the Hotel Volcan in Playa Brava, with

its sports bar, mini-golf and 'Kidz Klub'. Its functional bedrooms with their wipe-clean walls would never feature in a coffee-table book by Mr and Mrs Smith, that's for sure. The moment Chelsea clicked on the hotel website and looked at a depressing shot of an en-suite bathroom, she fancied she could actually smell the tiny bars of cheap white soap and feel the scratchy pink toilet paper that must not, under any circumstances, be flushed down the loo. Nothing turned Chelsea's stomach faster than the thought of a holiday resort without adequate plumbing. But what could Chelsea have said when her mother, Jacqui, called so full of excitement to confirm that the Lanzarote trip was on?

'We're going to the Hotel Volcan. They can put us all on the same floor with disabled access,' said Jacqui.

Same floor and disabled access. Such considerations were extremely important when your party included, at one end of the scale, an adventurous six-year-old and, at the other end, an eighty-five-year-old who was about as steady on his feet as a newborn wildebeest suckled on Guinness. Five rooms had to be booked in all, for this was to be a 'proper family holiday' involving the entire Benson clan – six adults and two children. No one was to be left out. No matter how much they might wish to be.

This proper family holiday was Jacqui Benson's idea of the perfect way to celebrate her upcoming sixtieth birthday. It was Chelsea's idea of pure hell.

Chapter Two

Ronnie

Ronnie Benson, Chelsea's big sister, was altogether more excited by the idea of a week in Playa Brava. After the year she'd had, she needed a week in the sun.

When Ronnie asked her mother what she would like as a gift for her milestone birthday, she had expected Jacqui to suggest her daughters chip in for a new watch or some more charms for her Pandora bracelet. Never in a million years did Ronnie think her mother might suggest a family gathering, much less a week-long family gathering in *Lanzarote*.

'You want to go *abroad*?'

'Your father and I have been planning this trip for years,' Jacqui told her.

'You never said.' After a second of delighted astonishment, Ronnie's thoughts immediately turned towards cost.

'We wanted it to be a surprise,' said Jacqui. 'And I know it sounds over the top, but you're not to worry – your dad and me are paying for everything. We just want you all to be there – you and Mark and the children. I can think of no better birthday gift than to have all my family around me. Especially . . .'

They were standing in the kitchen. Jacqui nodded through the open sitting-room door towards her

father-in-law, Bill, Ronnie's beloved granddad, who was asleep in his special chair. At eighty-five, having had just about every internal organ in his body replaced with a plastic valve, Bill was constantly threatening to shuffle off this mortal coil.

'He's always said he'd like to go to Lanzarote,' said Jacqui.

'Mum, are you sure?' Ronnie asked.

'Oh yes. He's always going on about it.'

'I mean, are you sure you and Dad want to pay for us all? We'd love to go, we really would, but it's going to be expensive. You're talking at least four rooms. More if Chelsea's coming.'

'Of course your sister's coming.'

'Really?' Ronnie fought the urge to voice her scepticism. Chelsea on a package trip to Lanzarote seemed as likely as the Duchess of Cambridge rocking up at Nando's.

'Really.'

'It'll cost a fortune. Mark and me will at least chip in for our lot.'

Even as Ronnie said it, she wondered how on earth she and Mark could afford even four easyJet flights to the island. Their finances were more overstretched than Donatella Versace's facelift. Mark worked as a kitchen fitter. It wasn't a badly paid job, but once the recession hit, his hours had been cut from full time to just three days a week. Ronnie had picked up the slack with a part-time admin job at a funeral director's (the credit crunch could not stop people dying), but still they had had to cut back. A holiday had not been on the agenda for that financial year, not when there were school uniforms to buy. A washing machine on its last legs, gas bills, council

tax, a car that needed servicing . . . Every time Ronnie thought she had the family finances under control, they were beset by some new disaster. To Ronnie's shame, she'd even considered having Fishy, the family cat, put down rather than pay for an expensive operation to fix her leg when the poor thing got run over. Things were that bad. (In the end, she'd stuck the op on her credit card). A holiday in Lanzarote was exactly what Ronnie needed and precisely what she couldn't afford.

'I know you've had a tough couple of years and that's why we're paying for you,' her mother insisted. 'I just want you all to be there.'

'But—'

'No buts, Veronica Benson. This is important to me. The money's already in the bank and I want to take you all away. If I don't spend it on this holiday, I'll only spend it in Per Una.'

'All right, Mum. Anything but more tat from Per Una.'

How could Ronnie refuse?

When he heard the news, Mark also expressed concern, but underneath his polite protestations that Ronnie's parents were being too generous as usual, he seemed delighted, as did the children. A free holiday was not to be sniffed at – especially a holiday in the sun – and, unusually, Mark actually enjoyed hanging out with his almost in-laws. Sophie, who was fifteen and a half, tried to play it cool, of course, but Ronnie knew her daughter was secretly pleased and relieved to be able to tell the girls at school she would be going on a proper foreign holiday that summer after all. Meanwhile, Jack, aged six, was still at an age when the idea of a family

gathering appealed to him enormously. Ronnie was sure Jack would have been equally thrilled to spend a week in a Travelodge near Wolverhampton so long as he had his family around him. His grandparents doted on him, but it was the thought of a week with Auntie Chelsea that seemed to tickle Jack most of all.

'Auntie Chelsea!' he squealed. 'Is she really coming? *Really* really? She can play cricket with me,' he added, remembering the last time he had seen his aunt, just over two years earlier, at a family barbecue. Chelsea had thrown a few balls for Jack that afternoon, in between turning her nose up at Mark's burgers and moaning to Ronnie about how hard she found her job at that posh magazine. She'd really hardly paid Jack any attention at all, but for some reason she'd left an indelible impression.

'I can't wait to see her,' said Jack.

'If she can be bothered to come,' Ronnie muttered to Mark. 'I can't imagine Miss Hoity-Toity is terribly excited by the idea of a package holiday in the Canaries. What will she say to the people at *Society*? I suppose she could always write a *hilarious* article about slumming it with the working classes.'

Mark just nodded. He knew better than to disagree with Ronnie where Chelsea was concerned.

From time to time you hear people refer to their siblings as their 'best friends'. Well, Ronnie and Chelsea definitely didn't have that sort of relationship. They hadn't spoken in two years.

It hadn't always been like that. Born just eighteen months apart, the Benson sisters had at another time

been inseparable. Ronnie had doted on her sweet younger sister Chelsea and Chelsea had considered big sister Ronnie the ultimate heroine and role model. As teenagers, in their shared bedroom in the terraced house where they grew up, they had talked late into the night about their plans to escape their boring home town and make their way together in London. They'd go to university, become successful businesswomen and travel the world first class. Chelsea was going to work in fashion. Ronnie was going to have her own recruitment company by the time she was twenty-five. The sisters were each other's cheerleaders. No way were they going to get stuck like their parents had.

Those ambitions were nipped in the bud when Ronnie turned seventeen and discovered she was pregnant.

It was a disaster. Just days earlier, Ronnie and her form teacher had been talking about university applications. Her teacher had suggested a string of top colleges. 'The sky's the limit for you, Ronnie Benson,' were her encouraging words.

It certainly hadn't been part of the plan to become a teenage mother.

Jacqui and Dave were strangely unfazed by the news of their elder daughter's unplanned pregnancy. Ronnie had expected them to be furious. She had expected recriminations and talk of having let them down. Let herself down. In the end, there was nothing of the sort.

'We'll get through it,' said her dad as he squeezed her in a bear hug. Jacqui agreed.

'We're right behind you, love,' she said. 'Every step of the way.'

Likewise, Ronnie's teachers were sympathetic and

did all they could to help her continue with her A-level courses, but Ronnie found her pregnancy surprisingly difficult and postponed her exams, with the intention of going to sixth-form college after the baby was born. However, when Sophie arrived, Ronnie was hit with a malaise she now knew to be postnatal depression. By the time Ronnie had enough energy to brush her hair in the mornings again, her brightest contemporaries were already on their way to university. Although she had actually only missed out on a year, Ronnie felt she would never be able to catch up and so she didn't bother.

Now, all these years later, Ronnie told herself that everything had turned out for the best. For a start, despite everyone's predictions to the contrary, Mark had stood by her. They'd been together since they were both fourteen. Mark had already left school and was working as an apprentice at a joinery company when Ronnie told him she was pregnant. He vowed right away he would provide for Ronnie and his child, and he had definitely made good on that promise.

Mark moved in with Ronnie and her parents as soon as the baby was born. When Sophie was two, the little family was able to move out of Ronnie's parents' house and into a rented place of their own. With overtime and a bit of work on the side at weekends, Mark earned enough for Ronnie to stay at home until Sophie could go to school. When Sophie was nine, Ronnie considered finishing her A-levels at an adult-education college, but then she fell pregnant with Jack and the cycle started all over again. Including the postnatal depression.

But this makes it all worth it, thought Ronnie, at such moments as when she watched twelve-year-old

Sophie, tall as a giraffe, make her precocious debut as goal defence in the school netball team. And what high-flying job could have been more satisfying than seeing four-year-old Jack play a sheep in his first nativity play? These were the consolations for having so spectacularly short-circuited her plans for world domination with an unprotected shag. Ronnie might not be living in a posh house or driving a fancy car like some of her old friends from school, but she had been able to see her children grow up, while her contemporaries were so scared of stepping off the career ladder they put their carefully planned babies into childcare at six months old. You never got those early years back. If you missed the first word, the first steps, that was it. Those were the things that magazine writer Chelsea didn't understand when she talked about how bored she would be if she were a stay-at-home mum.

'I don't know how you can stand not using your brain,' Chelsea had said the last time she and Ronnie were together. It was at that barbecue to celebrate their grandfather Bill's eighty-third birthday (Bill was celebrated every year now, just in case). That was the comment that sparked the discussion that became a full-blown row that ended with Chelsea accusing Ronnie of having become a mummy martyr and Ronnie accusing Chelsea of having turned into a self-obsessed snob, and subsequently led to the sisters' two-year-long estrangement.

'*Not using my brain!*'

Mark had become used to hearing Ronnie exclaim those four words at random moments during their week. It was usually when she had finished overseeing Sophie's maths homework or had finally deciphered an

incomprehensible instruction in a letter sent home from Jack's school. Ronnie would then segue into a rant about how Chelsea had no idea how taxing family life could be. Ensuring that two children and one other adult were fed, dressed, happy and healthy, all on the kind of budget that would have been tight enough for a singleton? That was no mean feat. And now Ronnie was working part time as well. She never had a minute to herself. From time to time, she really did feel as though she was running an army battalion. Chelsea did not have a clue what a mother's life was like.

Perhaps that's why she didn't see the need to apologise for her remarks, Mark occasionally dared to suggest. Only when Chelsea had a family of her own – assuming she could ever hang on to a man for long enough – would she realise the gravity of the insults she'd delivered over a chargrilled sausage in a bun.

'I don't care. I won't ever forgive her,' Ronnie claimed.

Jacqui's birthday wish was to change all that. Ronnie had to promise their mother she would put her anger to one side for just this week. For what might be their last 'proper family holiday'.

'The best birthday present you could ever give me is for you girls to be friends again, like you used to be.'

As though to emphasise her point, Jacqui looked towards that ancient photo of the sisters building a sandcastle on Littlehampton beach.

'All right,' said Ronnie. 'But Chelsea has to make an effort too.'

'I'm sure she will,' said Jacqui.

If only Ronnie could believe that. As it was, about a month before the trip, when Ronnie picked up the phone to offer the olive branch so that their first

face-to-face meeting would not be too strange, Chelsea acted as though those two years of radio silence hadn't even happened. She just went straight into a story about some fancy cocktail party she had attended for work. As Chelsea twittered on about the guest list, Ronnie was mortified to realise that while she had been nursing the mother of all grudges, Chelsea had carried on regardless, not questioning her sister's absence because her swanky London life and career were just *so* fulfilling. She simply hadn't noticed she and Ronnie were not on speaking terms.

Reading Chelsea's text from Gatwick, as she stood in the check-in queue in Birmingham, Ronnie fumed. She was certain that her snooty sister had missed her flight deliberately. Next thing, Chelsea would claim she couldn't get another flight. Ronnie would have put money on Chelsea not coming to Lanzarote at all.